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Victoria Silver

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An Apology for Queering Milton

Response by VICTORIA SILVER

That Milton is not Shakespeare has been a common judgment, and one rarely decided in Milton's favor. So it should come as no surprise that, as Will Stockton observes, queer readers have voted with their feet for the capacious, inclusive universe of Shakespeare studies and its many possible worlds. But if Dr. Johnson (who also disliked Shakespeare's tragedies) was not entirely wrong to say that no one ever wished *Paradise Lost* longer, that is because Milton's epic tends to be viewed not as literature but as versified ontology—the work of someone who knew, or thought he knew, the fundamental order of things. Whether this is what Milton meant by having his speaker propose to “assert eternal providence and justify the ways of God to men,” such assumptions are nothing new (Dr. Johnson himself having entertained them). Indeed, they appear congenital to the public reception, if not the poetic project of *Paradise Lost*. Homer and Virgil wrote epics filled with gods, but theology then is mythology to us now, and we do not take the judgments of Zeus or Jupiter personally. Dante, it is true, did undertake to picture metaphysical reality in the *Commedia*, with the result that popular demand for the *Inferno* vastly outstrips the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* because the penalties of sin are so much more entertaining than the rewards of saintliness. Indeed, the American reading public may adore the occult (zombies, vampires, demons), the supernatural (angels and the divine in mufti), and the extraterrestrial (alien abductions, Area 51); it may devour each new report back from heaven, the Light or the inside of the mothership; but it dislikes being judged, least of all eternally, by anyone not *simpatico*. In literary studies too and for much the same cause, the Judeo-Christian God still gets under our skin, which is why critics prefer their divinity, if they must have one at all, served up in multiple, obscure and exotic mediations, or dispensed with altogether, usually by calling it something else, like heteronormativity.

Early modern culture had a greater tolerance for this God than we do. Nonetheless, like ourselves, it was inclined to make deity over in its own image—an image almost as patriarchal as ever Jehovah had been and, as Milton often complains, altogether unlike the Jesus of the gospels. In making religious or civil law, the tendency was to ignore all but a few sentences of the New Testament, while borrowing liberally from the Old and whatever tribal tradition or immemorial custom lay to hand. Further, as Ian Maclean has argued, both ancient and scholastic authorities ensured that the culture clung to a set of gender values as venerable and largely identical with the Pythagorean contraries or “principles of things” that Aristotle discusses in the *Metaphysics*: “limit and unlimited, odd and even, one and plurality, right and left, male and female, rest and movement, straight and curved, light and darkness, good and evil, square and oblong” (986a-

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b). And precisely because it was a patriarchy in every sense, early modern culture conceived a horror of gender contingency, in the unsurprising belief that such instability threatened the very foundations of its order. So, in Ben Jonson's neat phrase from *Epicoene*, "female vice should be a virtue male, / Or masculine vice, a female virtue be" (12-13)—a gender dictum pervading the literature of the age but not always in the same way, or even with the dominant significance of world subversion, as Shakespeare's romantic comedies abundantly imply (Jonson 292).

Compared to Shakespeare (or Sidney or Spenser, Ariosto or Tasso), Milton's poetry would appear to suffer from grave disadvantages in this regard, not all of which are owing to the Father's presence on the set: because everyone is naked, there are no pants roles in *Paradise Lost* (although Eve does wear them in Book Nine while Dalila hid them beneath her skirts). Nor does epic afford the theatrical occasion for boys to play girls (although Raphael and the Lord seem to think Adam comes close, and Samson fears the same for himself). Of course, Milton's only play is a closet drama (the theaters being closed for the Interregnum), and to that extent cannot be said to court the psychological plague of spontaneous deviance predicted by anti-theatricalists (although Drew Daniel suggests the tragic hero himself is one of them). Besides, Samson, once shorn and now eyeless in Gaza, has biblical authority for his emasculation, as Dalila does for her virility. In both of Milton's epics, the tropological contagion of effeminacy appears confined to the dim, sybaritic Belial (Daniel), but only if we ignore the classical and humanist *topos* of tyranny that decks out Milton's devil, whose operatic loquacity, histrionic duplicity, vulgar opulence and sheer snobbery clearly announce the return of the repressed king, or queen. It also signals Satan's capacity for the polymorphous-perverse pleasure-seeking that republican polemic ascribed to tyrants and court parasites, and that Lynn Hunt has termed the "pomography" of political absolutism. Similarly, when prelates and priests make their figurative appearance, which they do promiscuously in the tracts and when one least expects it in the poetry, the imagery of autoeroticism expands exponentially. And that is because, if one is a dissenting Protestant in this tragic age of religious civil war, Roman and Anglican Catholicism are made the font of all perceived perversions.

Yet the ribald sexual imagination and robust bawdy which permeate most early modern literature and of course Shakespeare seem barely to break the surface of Milton's poetry, although when they do (Daniel), they can unmold the apparent sense of an entire passage. At the same time, his writing does not lack for full-fledged eroticism. Adam, Satan and especially the epic narrator all have a thing for our General Mother, and so do Eden's fruits and flowers. Eve herself moons over her fair outside, that is, until her reverie is broken by the divine imperative of species reproduction; but at the first sight of Adam's sexual difference, she turns to flee back to her own delectable likeness. Yet even before *Paradise Lost*, the Circean sorcerer and proxy courtier, Comus, who is all urgent sentience and libertine sexuality, cannot keep his febrile touch off that notable invert, Milton's Lady or the Lady Milton, whom he would divert, pervert and convert to his own circadian rhythms (Melissa Sanchez). Owing to their refined substance, angelic bodies achieve a degree of interpenetration about which Donne's or Rochester's speakers can only fantasize, making Raphael blush at the very thought, and not

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out of shame (since the unfallen are guiltless) but pleasure (Stephen Guy-Bray). And for those still curious, it appears true from the catalogue of demons that the capacity of angels to assume both male and female shapes does extend the sexual range of the apostate (Guy-Bray and Daniel).

As the form of divine good, the power of beauty to entrance its beholders crosses not only genders but species and aeons (Guy-Bray). However perfect in his kind, Adam is entirely smitten by Raphael's "glorious shape" (Guy-Bray) "whose excellence he saw / Transcend his own so far" that he doubts his own merely human adequacy (*PL* 5.456-58). Similarly, a pompous Satan, whose "glory obscured" moves all hell and Milton's speaker (*PL* 1.594), pines for his lost beauty reflected in the unfallen cherubim he had thought to disdain, chagrined "chiefly to find here observed / His lustre visibly impaired" (*LM:PL* 4.844-50). For much the same reason as Eve's absorption in her own watery image, the apostate hordes cannot avert their gaze from their great chief, which has truly spectacular consequences for all concerned in Book Ten. But while heroic homosociality seems to rule in Milton's hell, with all that this might portend of subterranean passions, the apostate angels appear incapable of doing anything about it, so absorbed is each one in his own pathos. Narcissism also abounds in the nostalgia of the fallen for a lost heaven, where it complicates Satan's feelings for his erstwhile God, whether Father, Son and Messiah, or Our Saviour in *Paradise Regained*, for whom he adopts the debonaire guise of "one in city, or court, or palace bred" (*LM:PR* 2.300), and lays a "table spread, in regal mode" with "Tall stripling youths rich-clad, of fairer hue/ Than Ganymede or Hylas," along with nymphs, Naiades and "ladies of the Hesperides" (*LM:PR* 2.340, 352-57).

Admittedly, these are themes and motifs whose significance finally depends on the poet's usage; but Will is nonetheless right to say there is a case for queering Milton, unless one takes the carefully bald "argument" that prefaces each book of *Paradise Lost* as the totality of Milton's poetic intent or the poem's meaning. If we did, then there would be no Milton studies, and very likely no readers of Milton either. As always, the problem here is interpretive orthodoxy, which fluctuates with every new generation and every new trend; indeed, orthodoxies are conceived and promulgated for that very reason—opinion shifts, and it especially shifts when the question is a matter of interpretation (and what, said jesting Pilate, is not). Consensus is something different—a description of the state of our belief, not a proscription of it: consensus should still allow for dissent whereas dogma struggles to contain the instinctive human drive to make satisfactory sense of experience—to find the world meaningful and profound as well as uncertain, trivial, difficult, perplexing, appalling and even unspeakable. One would think that literary critics would know better by now, given the conviction of other academic fields (philosophy in particular) that our analyses lack rigorousness, rest on wholly insufficient grounds, are merely "subjective," whatever that means.

But the hope for some self-skepticism as well as critical tolerance of others' opinions must confront our visceral attachment to our own ideas as true, right and just—God to us—whether they can take the form of received assumptions or the intellectual intuitions that we struggle in our work to make

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articulate and evident. Such passionate belief, or more properly, identification with what we ourselves think makes every student of any subject dismissive in private, where we can be pleurably alone with our own dogmas. But since we publish those opinions as part of our profession, literary critics like all academics must confront the fact of a plurality of views, however configured by intellectual vogues or disciplinary consensus. And while we may silently crave to make our dogma everyone else's, it never can and never should be, because to do so transforms truth-seeking into power-mongering. Worse still, like the apostate angels who are self-condemned to repetition of the same, we will never learn a new thing.

Orthodoxy was of course a problem for Milton too, and those critics who take Milton as their subject would always do well to consult the author on the question of intellectual inquiry. In 1667, when *Paradise Lost* was first published, Milton was mostly known as a Cromwellian *apparachik*, an apologist for regicide as well as the crass debunker of "the king's book," *Eikon Basilike*; moreover, rumor apparently had it that he was a bigamist. Such notoriety was sufficient at the Restoration to secure his (temporary) arrest and to raise questions about the decision not to except him from the Act of Indemnity and Oblivion. From what we can tell, Milton was eccentric even from his Cambridge days, when he refused ordination in favor of a self-ordained plan of study whose fruits never cease to amaze. Later of course, he became a full-blown rebel against church and state, and from time to time, an outlaw, depending on whom was in charge. This fact has figured in Milton studies by his being Satanized in the Romantic fashion, which because Milton is himself a god of the English literary canon, has always lent that critical turn to the Dark Side a certain *frisson*, as it does the not-dissimilar activity of figuring out new ways to deflate his huge poetic afflatus.

But in his lifetime, being John Milton did not mean being on top. As a controversialist in the early 1640s, Milton was without much authority—too young, too obscure, too left field. Nonetheless, his tracts managed to scandalize one party or another: first, the bishops and their supporters, then parliament and the Presbyterians, after that monarchists both national and international, not to mention public sentiment on the eve of monarchy's and Anglicanism's restoration, and in 1673 with his last tract, Gilbert Sheldon's resettled church, the Cavalier parliament and no doubt the king too—that is, in the unlikely event that it was read by any of them. But once *Paradise Lost* was discovered by the Duke of Dorset, browsing among the booksellers' stalls in Little Britain as legend has it, the poem's sudden emergence was greeted as if it were the birth of Athena from the head of Zeus, at least by the *cognoscenti* of the new regime. The rapt enthusiasm with which Dryden celebrates Milton's achievement is indicative:

Three poets, in three distant ages born,
Greece, Italy, and England did adorn.
The first in loftiness of thought surpass'd,
The next in majesty, in both the last:
The force of Nature could no farther go;
To make a third, she join'd the former two. (Patterson *liii*)

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If no Byronic frenzy greeted his new eminence, Milton's audacity in picturing (as they saw it) the one true God did shock some, who considered the poem blasphemous on that count and others, inasmuch as *Paradise Lost* was figuratively populated with all the poet's Christian heresies, including the most heinous at that or any other time, antitrinitarianism (*Christian Doctrine*, his theological treatise, no doubt went unpublished because the 1662 Act of Uniformity criminalized Socinianism, the catch-word for that heresy). But his fellow scribblers saw to it that Milton's sudden eminence was perpetuated—Addison especially, who made himself the impresario of Miltoniana—until Milton's literary stature and his own Tory politics compelled Dr. Johnson to put poet and poem in their proper place, this time as a palinode in which Sin erupts out of Milton's republican egotism. The rest, as they say, is history, with the battle well joined between lovers and haters of the poet, with some of both persuasions in Milton studies. At a conference some years ago, where I delivered a paper on defamation in Milton's anti-prelatical tracts, I had the peculiar felicity of a distinguished scholar pronouncing at its end that my subject was a regicide, a murderer and a libeller, whom he implied nothing could redeem. But one doesn't have to be royalist and Anglican, or a Restoration scholar, to detest the poet: as I said, recent generations of Miltonists, brought up on the hermeneutics of suspicion, have made it a critical sport to catch their subject out in his neuroses, logical contradictions and ideological lapses—like Dr. Johnson, exposing the idol's feet of clay.

But then, which of us is perfect? I am myself no stranger to controversy in Milton studies, which is one reason why Will solicited my response to the fine essays assembled for this issue of *Early Modern Culture* on “queering Milton.” Indeed, a couple of students informed me (I am not currently working in the field) that a Miltonist of note evidently found my own reading of the subject so objectionable that he declared in a footnote that he would not deign to consider it. Since being thus excepted could pique the reader's interest, I should thank him, as he should thank me for moving him to set the record straight as he sees it. However, Will's trepidation in the face of the Milton establishment, which to my certain knowledge is far from monolithic, does give me pause, along with student reports from the front, by which I mean the Milton list-serv whose bouts of incivility place it right up there with World of Warcraft as a model of intellectual engagement. But while there are certainly a few in the field who relish what Milton euphemistically called “the wars of Truth,” bad manners and closed minds are hardly unique to Milton studies; and in the poet's own day, intellectual controversy could reach heights of abuse for the most part undreamed of in our academy. And it must be confessed that the aggressiveness that obtains and is even celebrated in some academic quarters can derive from a sense of the urgency and importance of the questions in hand, no doubt aggravated by the perpetual gap between human aspiration and human means (or what's a heaven for?).

Whether adequately or not, Milton defended his own infamously “tart rhetoric” on such grounds, seeing himself engaged in matters which, while irreducibly interpretive, were nonetheless of the greatest moment. But except when the English major is made a national laughingstock, as it currently is by

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politicians, the media and the rest of campus, the larger world remains perfectly indifferent to literary criticism, whose activity and purposes it neither understands nor values. From such a vantage, our wars cannot but appear petty and ourselves ridiculous. At the same time, we must not acquiesce in our trivialization: Milton did not, whose artistic stature was always impending until his final decade, and whose personal (as against Cromwellian) tracts do not seem to have risen above the generality of the pamphlet wars, with the negative exception of *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1644). But soon enough, they were recalled and read at other “revolutions”—in 1689, 1776 and 1789—and not only by Whigs and Romantics. They are now anthologized along with those of key republicans and dissenters, and even noticed by some political historians.

And yet Milton and his controversial writings were judged ridiculous, even unconscionable, and as he himself pointed out, usually by those whose received authority or incumbency led them to suppose that God fought for them. But despite an egotism infinitely more justifiable than his opponents’ or indeed any Milton critic’s, and his sometimes indecorous zeal on behalf of the Good Old Cause, I sincerely doubt Milton believed God spoke to him in the night watches, or in any other than the usual way—through scripture—although it was regularly inferred from occasional passages in the tracts and of course the proems of *Paradise Lost* that he did. Owing to their religious and presumptively metaphysical nature, as I mentioned, his poetic expressions have been assigned a peculiar literality by some readers; but this inclination to literalism is also the fault of his own penchant for autobiographical excursus in the tracts—a defense against the *ad hominem* polemics of the day, or put another way, an abiding hunger to be recognized in his own terms. Because that recognition did not come until he probably knew its dubious value, Milton saw the human experience of deity and truth as interpretive, moral and historical, which is to say, conditional upon the evidence of scriptural expression, the integrity of each person’s understanding and choice, and the flux of circumstance with which he believed divine providence surrounds us for a purpose.

I have argued that this is the invariable predicament of human faith in an insuperably hidden God, to which the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as well as the Protestant reformers return again and again, not to mention the Miltonic “I” who must regularly make that recognition in one form or another, and to which it must accommodate its all-too-human desires as Milton found himself obliged to do, both early and late. It is also the ordinary predicament of human knowledge, where we believe much and (in the philosophical sense) know little. Milton is no biblicist: he acknowledges the corrupt transmission of scripture (the Christian texts especially), and the difficulties posed by scriptural locutions more generally—the “hard places” on which he declines to build, focusing instead on what is clearly if not always positively expressed. As early as the *Prolusions*, he conspicuously adopted a Baconian skepticism about the untrammelled workings of the human mind (usually of the scholastic and metaphysical persuasion): indeed, Bacon’s idols and Milton’s idolatry share this same deluded source, which in its operations tends to mistake the specious for the real, the received and familiar for the right and true, and to conceive justice as the demand that everyone think and act as “I” do.

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But he also combined such skepticism with Bacon's exuberant sense of human possibility—that is, once such idolatrous tendencies were recognized and contained by an apt and conscientious *organon* or method of inquiry.

As I see it, method for Milton meant the adoption and observance of what amounts to an imminent, rhetorically-sensitive hermeneutic—the “grammatical-historical” method of exegesis, which was not original to him but to the rise of early modern humanism. Its northern cynosure was Erasmus, from whom, ironically, Luther learned about the Hebrew genitive and thereby justification *sola gratia*, *sola fides*, *sola scriptura*, which in large measure begat the Protestant Reformation. As Milton himself describes them in *Christian Doctrine*, the exegetical criteria for valid inference are

linguistic ability, knowledge of the original sources, consideration of the overall intent, distinction between literal and figurative language, examination of the causes and circumstances, and of what comes before and after the passage in question, and comparison of one text with another. It must always be asked, too, how far the interpretation is in agreement with faith. Finally, one often has to take into account the anomalies of syntax, as, for example, when a relative does not refer to its immediate antecedent but to the principle word in the sentences, although it is not so near it. . . . Lastly, no inferences should be made from the text, unless they follow necessarily from what is written. This precaution is necessary, otherwise we may be forced to believe something which is not written instead of something which is, and to accept human reasoning, generally fallacious, instead of divine doctrine, thus mistaking the shadow for the substance. What we are obliged to believe are the things written in the sacred books, not the things debated in academic gatherings. (YP 6:582-83)

In short, Miltonic exegesis conceived the divine word not as transcendent but as incarnate, embedded like human beings themselves in the maze of lived as against speculative circumstance, right down to the operations of syntax. As he argues in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, exegesis is itself equitable speech that resolves the anomalous or exceptional expression by attending to the context of utterance—“what comes before and after the passage in question”: for “there is scarce any one saying in the Gospel, but must be read with limitations and distinctions, to be rightly understood . . . which requires a skilfull and laborious gatherer [to] compare the words he finds, with other precepts, with the end of every ordinance, and with the general *analogy* of Evangelick doctrine.” “Otherwise,” Milton observes, “many particular sayings would be but strange repugnant riddles.” (YP 2:338)

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Thus Milton resists both a crude and a metaphysical literalism, the first confining scriptural expression to its merely ostensible or superficial sense, the second converting figurative speech into symbols of supernatural entities (the source of Trinitarianism in Milton's view). In either case, a failure to consider variations in usage denies the fact that neither speech nor its speakers can escape the human condition, whose intelligibility is embodied in particular experiences, occasions, desires and needs. Yet if exegesis should not stray from the natural or grammatical force of scriptural expressions—should not concoct or impose a semantic order for its books that lacks an evidentiary basis—Milton's rhetorical emphasis on "the overall intent" recognizes the complex configuration of motives, "causes and circumstances," which inform anything we say or do. And he practiced this equitable method with considerable insight and such scrupulous care that while it was the singular source of his heterodoxy, his readings of the scriptural text still stand up. But because he admits the ordinary contingencies of existence, Milton has been accused of illogic and expedience, although at this late date we should know that the formalities of logic and the so-called "laws of thought" pertain to a specific disciplinary use of language that is performed in philosophy departments, and which (as Wittgenstein observed decades ago, Hobbes in the seventeenth century, and rhetoricians a couple of millenia earlier) bears little resemblance to how we actually use and make sense of words.

These charges are usually made where it is presumed that Milton has a personal ax to grind, with his invocation in that tract of "charity" and "equity" mistakenly made self-serving when these values are long-standing principles of interpretation in theology and law, both exegetical disciplines which argue against *strictum jus*—the obtuse expectation that the meaning of human speech and action is general and unconditioned, like logic itself proposes to be. Although scripture in Milton's view has a single sense, the gospel or *kerygma* announcing Jesus as the Christ, he was not so zany as to suppose that recourse to method would somehow produce in every mind an identical reading, much less a univocal doctrine in all matters; nor was that a desideratum of his faith. Reasonable inference, well-grounded in the text, was desirable, while coercion in pursuit of even outward uniformity—the policy of every regime under which he lived (however moderated under the Protectorate)—was anathema to him. If forcible conformity in religion preceded the reformation in England, it also ensued from it—the Henrician settlement having made church and state constitutionally one, thereby turning religious dissent into sedition and treason where before it had been heresy (the punishment was capital either way). Furthermore, especially under Elizabeth and James, conformity to the state church was popularly regarded as patriotic, which is why Milton's express tolerance for sectarianism in the tracts makes him, if not unique, then notable; and this was not only because he had become a sect unto himself.

For one thing, as a Protestant, he persisted despite many disappointments in thinking that humanity is educable; moreover, unlike the Erastian Luther or the theocratic Calvin, he felt that the principle of Christian liberty ought to have public as well as private consequences; and however mistakenly in the event, he put his political faith in the experience of freedom itself, on the model of the Protestant

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Reformation. Moreover, he was also a member of the Cromwellian government, who by his own account chose to lose his remaining eyesight in order to write his first *Defense of the English People*, which hardly suggests the transcendental turn or antinomian paralysis ascribed to him. Nor is the appropriate comparison here with democratic radicals like Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn, next to whom his liberalism may appear weak-kneed. It should be with the beliefs which commonly governed seventeenth-century politics, whether a Presbyterian commonwealth or the restored monarchy.

As any number of historians have pointed out, the greatest of these was “order,” simply because its achievement was felt—accurately or not—to be the most important, the most fragile and, as represented by the rule of law, a less pervasive aspect of early modern English life. From this angle, Milton’s constant extenuation over two decades for civil and religious tumult and change, including civil war, the overthrow of the English constitution, and the king’s judicial execution, is truly audacious (and it would have been more dangerous if more people had read him). The conditions he regarded as necessary and inevitable to the vital work of reform looked to the majority of the nation like a world grown suddenly unrecognizable and repulsive—capricious, discordant, perverse, the world famously “turned upside down.” But then, as Milton reminds us, what custom or orthodoxy inclines us to take for truth can lead to our outlawing the real thing; for “if it comes to prohibiting, there is not ought more likely to be prohibited than truth it self; whose first appearance to our eyes blear’d and dimm’d with prejudice and custom, is more unsightly and unplaussible than many errors” (YP 2:565).

In that final tract to which I referred, *Of True Religion, Heresy, Schism, Toleration* (1673), he sought (culpably in our view) to exploit for Protestant dissenters the tactical advantage offered by a national outburst of “anti-popery,” consequent upon Charles’ Declaration of Indulgence (1672), which had just been rescinded by the king in the face of implacable opposition from the Cavalier parliament. Ostensibly, the Indulgence sought to ease the lot of all nonconformists which had been rendered still more painful and abject by the second Conventicles Act of 1670, whose new severity Marvell memorably termed “the quintessence of arbitrary malice.” Moreover, Charles was about to embark on a second war with the Dutch, and his ministers (the infamous Cabal) thought by the Indulgence to pacify the homefront, murmuring under an increasingly heavy tax burden. But unfortunately, the Dutch were Protestants with an exceedingly active printing industry (of which both English intellectual and religious dissenters had long availed themselves), while the government had allied itself with Catholic France, a fact with which the Dutch made great play in their propaganda. Given the general virulence of English “anti-popery” and a growing distrust of their king among the voting classes, the Declaration was popularly taken as an attempt by a crypto-Catholic to rescue the legal position of his co-religionists. But Charles’ government would also seem to have had a larger legal aim, as parliament contended in its replies to the king; and that was to assert in the best Stuart fashion the royal prerogative, in effect testing the suspending and dispensing powers which arguably attended the monarch’s position as supreme governor of the state church. It was

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a move that could be and was seen as a possible first step towards reestablishing Roman Catholicism in England (in exchange for subsidy, Charles had just promised Louis as much in the Secret Treaty of Dover of 1670, although evidently without any immediate intention of fulfilling his commitment).

Since Milton shared the patriotic English aversion to “popery,” he rejected the proffered Indulgence owing to its arguably unconstitutional means (Bunyan would do the same with James’ less problematical Declarations in 1687 and 1688, which William Penn for his part would embrace, earning odium for himself in most of the dissenting community). However, as Keith Staveland argues, Milton evidently hoped the “no popery” agitation would result in a compensatory bill, then under discussion in committee, limiting the penal measures against dissenters in the name of Protestant unity. To promote that bill, which eventually died with the session in the House of Lords, he wrote this patently polemical tract, *True Religion*, but to no avail because Charles, faced with signs of what would become Exclusionist sentiment, prorogued parliament. However, the session did produce the first Test Act banning Catholics from political office of any kind, whose oath of allegiance, now denying the Tridentine dogma of transubstantiation, exposed by default the Catholicism of the Duke of York, Lord Admiral, and Charles’ treasurer, Lord Clifford, who privately resigned their offices—if not their integrity.

Between his animadversions on “the common adversary” (YP 8:420), “the Papal Anti-christian Church” and what he regards as its habitual idolatry (YP 8:434), Milton surveys the doctrines of the various Protestant denominations—“Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists, Socinians, Arminians” but tellingly not Quakers—having declared at the outset against “the Papist” that “All these may have some errors, but are no heretics” (YP 8:423). It is a distinction frequently observed by those writers and politicians who promoted liberty of conscience for all, and, as Blair Worden has argued, constituted government policy under the Protectorate, which the Calendar of State Papers Domestic shows in action. But in a strictly legal sense, he can say this because heresy was no longer a crime in England—Elizabeth’s Act of Uniformity (1559) having once again repealed the medieval statutes revived by Mary Tudor. Moreover, in 1677, perhaps out of the mixed motives which gave Milton his brief hope, the same parliament that devised the Clarendon Code and issued the Test Act would abolish the last relic of heresy legislation—the writ *de heretico comburendo*, unused since 1612 when it was issued to burn two Anabaptists under the personal supervision of James I (Browning 8:400). So Milton can fairly claim that “Popery is the only or the greatest Heresie” extant in Christendom, “and he who is so forward to brand all others for Hereticks, the obstinate Papist, the only Heretick” (YP 8:421), insofar as the papacy demanded the complete, unreflective submission of faith to “a Religion taken up and believe’d from the traditions of men and additions to the word of God” (YP 8:421), which is heresy in Milton’s definition.

What *True Religion* scathingly calls “the growth of this Romish weed” had in the past usually exercised Milton’s pen only when he lambasted Anglican or Presbyterian churches for perpetuating the relics of “popish” practices (prelacy, liturgy, canon law), or for emulating the papacy’s repressive policies (uniformity

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and censorship) (YP 8:417). But here he does not (only) tar both with a popish brush, but draws the Reformers' fundamental distinction on behalf of toleration: Roman Catholicism "permits not her Laity to read the Bible in their own tongue" (YP 8:434) and, by a range of further interdictions, prohibits the active inquiry made possible at least in theory when the Henrician settlement placed the Great Bible in every parish (it should be noted that the medieval heresy statutes and one of Henry's own were still in force at the time, since Henry himself purposed no change in the English church from Catholic doctrine or worship). By contrast, Milton defines Protestants as those who recognize two fundamental principles, namely, "that the Rule of true Religion is the Word of God only; and that their Faith ought not to be an implicit faith" (YP 8:420), that is, it should be understood as well as believed:

Heresie is in the Will and choice profestly against Scripture; error is against the Will, in misunderstanding the Scripture after all sincere endeavours to understand it rightly: Hence it was said well by one of the Ancients, *Err I may, but a Heretick I will not be*. It is a humane frailty to err, and no man is infallible here on earth. But so long as all these profess to set the Word of God only before them as the Rule of faith and obedience; and use all diligence and sincerity of heart, by reading, by learning, by study, by prayer for Illumination of the Holy Spirit, to understand the Rule and obey it, they have done what man can do: God will assuredly pardon them, as he did the friends of *Job*; good and pious men, though much mistaken, as there it appears, in some points of doctrine. (YP 8:423-24)

Milton's point here—and my own as a literary critic—is that there is no heresy wherever an effort is made to understand and elucidate the text which, God "having made no man infallible" (including the pope), is "what man can do" (YP 8:424). Interpretation is a matter of probabilities, not certainties. Thus to exact from others unwavering adherence to received opinion, usually in *adiaphora* or "things indifferent" and therefore inessential to salvation, is a far greater abuse of faith than permitting disagreement over what should in fact be left elective, free of merely human impositions in the form of "a command or a Prohibition, and so consequently an addition to the word of God" (YP 8:428). "Besides," Milton observes, "how unequal, how uncharitable must it needs be, to Impose that which his conscience cannot urge him to impose, upon him whose conscience forbids him to obey?" (YP 8:428). In a fugue of *erotema*, Milton pursues this problem of arbitrary and self-aggrandizing authority in matters where no certainty can be had, demanding of the reader: "If he who thinks himself in the truth professes to have learnt it, not by implicit faith, but by attentive study of the Scriptures & full perswasion of heart, with what equity can he refuse to hear or read him, who demonstrates to have gained his knowledge by the same way? Is it a fair course to

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assert truth by arrogating to himself the only freedom of speech, and stoping the mouths of others equally gifted?" (YP 8:436).

Equity or fairness means charitable allowance and equal right to an unburdened conscience and to opinions freely expressed—in a word, toleration, which Milton was brave to use. For "What Protestant then who himself maintains the same Principles, and disavowes all implicit Faith, would persecute, and not rather charitably tolerate such men as these, unless he mean to abjure the Principles of his own Religion?" (YP 8:426). *Erotema* are conspicuous in *True Religion* and not just because Milton feels the urgency of the moment and the issue he has in hand. He intends with each rhetorical question to pose home truths, to interrogate the reader's conscience—to challenge us to admit the inferences he successively draws from the tract's definition of heresy and what are taken to be Protestant first principles by the various denominations who subscribe to that title. The originally geometrical maxim he invokes (and calls logical)—"*against them who deny Principles, we are not to dispute*" (YP 8:432)—pertains to more than the futility of arguing with those who do not share our assumptions, namely, Roman Catholics who refuse to acknowledge scripture as the sole and proper source of Christian knowledge. Its invocation here signals what Milton's polemic may disguise, that the argument for toleration in *True Religion* should have the force of deductive necessity for anyone who claims to be a Protestant.

The problem, as he knew from experience, is that both Anglicans and Presbyterians, while professing to accept these Protestant principles, pervert them by admitting political imperatives extraneous to ecclesiastical concerns. However intelligible given the early modern concern for "order," or legally justifiable given the constitutional identity of church and state in English law, uniformity of religious observance is just such a political perversion (paradoxically justified by the claim that what was "inessential" or "indifferent" left government free to legislate in that arena). But it is cruel and inhumane nonsense—Marvell's "arbitrary malice"—when considered from the vantage of faith in what Luther calls *res non apparentes*, things which do not appear as such. Milton goes on to define the extent of this toleration and the exercise of Christian liberty by English subjects, "as being all Protestants, that is on all occasions to give account of their Faith, either by Arguing, Preaching in their several Assemblies, Publick writing, and the freedom of Printing" (YP 8:426).

Invoking Paul in Thessalonians, he asks "How shall we prove all things, which includes all opinions at least founded on Scripture, unless we not only tolerate them, but patiently hear them, and seriously read them?" (YP 8:436). What Stavely mistakenly regards as an originally Latitudinarian distinction between involuntary error and willful heresy Milton had argued since the 1640s and *The Reason of Church Government* (1642), where he represents the rise of Protestant sectarianism in England as a necessary, refining contest between truth and error, an *agon* which the nation, like Samson, should undergo if it would be open to the reforming hand of divine providence. To this extent, the tracts consistently propound a restrictive antinomianism that seeks to remove whatever obstacles—episcopacy, canon law, presbytery, censorship, monarchy, the constitutional union

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of church and state—whose effect is to constrain Christian liberty and stand in the way of God’s revelation to the English people, “being all Protestants.”

This last stipulation, and his strictures against Roman Catholic worship and devotion as “idolatrous,” can be taken as a show of bigotry, or at least a demagogic blot on Milton’s liberal scutcheon. However, we do well to remember that the charge of heresy was first levelled by the papacy, which excommunicated Henry and then Edward, rested with Mary’s brief spell of *auto de fe*, and then paused in order to take the measure of Elizabeth’s regime. Having done so to his satisfaction Pius V issued the Bull *Regnans in excelsis* in 1570, denouncing Elizabeth as “a heretic and favourer of heretics,” excommunicating her and absolving her subjects of their obedience, so as to prepare the way for the queen’s ultimate assassination (Elton 427). When combined with Mary Stuart’s arrival incontinent from Scotland in 1568, as Catholic Europe’s great white hope; the immense pressure exerted by the Jesuit missionary movement, begun in 1577; the chronic arrival on British shores of the Spanish Armada from 1588 on, and Spain’s war with the Protestant Netherlands, the English public came to regard Roman Catholicism not as a Christian faith or even a church but as “popery” and a hostile polity. And then there was “Treason’s Masterpeece,” the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 to assassinate James and parliament together, devised by a handful of English Catholics whose overthrow inspired the Observance of the Fifth of November or “Thanksgiving” Act in 1606, with its fireworks, bonfires and burning of popes in effigy.

Owing to what he describes as the papacy’s habit of international aggression but more particularly its internal policy of violence against dissent, Milton shares that prejudice but on the principle that “Ecclesiastical is ever pretended to Political”—a pretension as Anglican as it was papal, although he is careful not to say so here (YP 8:429):

The Pope by this mixt faculty, pretends right to Kingdoms and States, and especially to this of *England*, Thrones and Unthrones Kings, and absolves the people from their obedience to them; sometimes interdicts to whole Nations the Publick worship of God, shutting up their Churches: and was wont to dreign away greatest part of the wealth of this then miserable Land, as part of his Patrimony, to maintain the Pride and Luxury of his Court and Prelates, and now since, through the infinite mercy and favour of God, we have shaken off his *Babylonish* Yoke, hath not ceas’d by his Spyes and Agents, Bulls and Emissaries, once to destroy both King and Parliament; perpetually to seduce, corrupt, and pervert as many as they can of the People. Whether therefore it be fit or reasonable, to tolerate men thus principl’d in Religion towards the State, I submit it to the consideration of all Magistrates, who are best able to provide for their own and the publick safety. (YP 8:430)

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With this final gesture at the Cavalier parliament—itself the implacable foe of English dissent—Milton makes clear that the true idol of Roman Catholicism is the pope and his claim of infallibility, to which *A Treatise of Civil Power* (1659) amply attests in its argument for the separation of church and state, ecclesiastical from political jurisdictions. It is on the grounds of such idolatry that he affirms the English response to the papal bull damning Elizabeth—the 1571 Act (13 Elizabeth I c.2) “against the bringing in and putting in execution of bulls and other instruments from the see of Rome” (Elton 428). The statute was intended not only to prohibit the publishing of *Regnan in excelsis* in England, but also as a kind of symbolic equivalent to the Act of Supremacy’s assertion of *praemunire*—the monarch’s exclusive legal jurisdiction in his or her regality. It achieves this by prohibiting the importation of all religious paraphernalia carrying the pope’s blessing and therewith his authority: “any token or tokens, thing or things, called by the name of an *Agnus Dei*, or any crosses, pictures, beads or suchlike vain and superstitious from the bishop or see of Rome, or from any person or persons authorised or claiming authority by or from the said bishop or see of Rome to consecrate or hallow the same” (Elton 431).

Like the rest of Elizabethan “anti-popery” legislation, the purpose of whose savagery was apparently deterrence since it was erratically enforced except against Jesuits and priests, this statute was still on the books a hundred years later, and for the same reasons which told against the Declaration of Indulgence in 1673 and again in 1688—fear that a Catholic king would reestablish that religion and papal jurisdiction in England. If the effect of the Tudor bill was to deprive Roman Catholics of any new articles of devotion and worship (and what they had were later subject to confiscation under the still more egregious 1593 Act for “securing the Queen’s subjects in obedience” [35 Elizabeth 1 c.2]), it was only implemented during political panics like this one in 1673. Unfortunately, with the Declaration of Indulgence and the Test Act, which revealed in quick succession that James had not only converted to Rome but was about to wed Mary of Modena, a Catholic princess, the nation’s combustible prejudices were fully ignited: “On 5 November [1673], there were more bonfires and more popes burnt in effigy than there had been for thirty years,” John Miller reports (Miller 131).

No doubt during the Commonwealth, his nation had in Milton’s view once more shaken off the Babylonian yoke of prelacy and the magistrate’s coercive power in religion, only to have the Presbyterians reimpose it in another form, and the Protectorate remove it again, until the Restoration when it was yet once more reestablished. But for the same politic reasons that lead him to invoke the Thirty-Nine Articles and the prudence of magistracy, much goes unsaid in *True Religion*. The advice it gives for rooting out the “Romish weed” is all but straightforwardly advice for reforming religious policy: first, “to read duly and diligently the Holy Scriptures,” since the neglect of such study leads to “implicit faith, ever learning and never taught, much hearing and small proficience, till want of Fundamental knowledg easily turns to superstition and Popery” (YP 8:433-34). Next, to extend a national policy of tolerance towards other Protestant sects, including “freedom of speech,” for “no Learned man but will confess he hath much profited by reading Controversies, his Senses awakt, his Judgement sharpen’d, and the truth

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he holds more firmly establish't" (YP 8:437). And finally, "to amend our lives," which notoriously in the reign of "the merry monarch" (an epithet always invoked by historians in this context) had "grown more numerous and excessively vitious than heretofore; Pride, Luxury, Drunkenness, Whoredom, Cursing, Swearing, bold and open Atheism every where abounding" (YP 8:438). There is also, as Staveland remarks, the unmistakable hint that God is already punishing England for its copious immorality by "Pestilence, Fire, Sword and Famine" (YP 8:439), in the shape of the great plague of 1665, the great fire of London in 1666, and the defeats suffered in Charles' first war against the Dutch, on the tremulous eve of that war's renewal.

Yet in the midst of the anti-popish hysteria which *True Religion* does nothing to abate, Milton nonetheless extends to Roman Catholics the same immunity from coercive civil measures for which he argues in the case of Protestants: "Are we to punish them by corporal punishment, or fines in their Estates, upon account of their Religion? I suppose it stands not with the Clemency of the Gospel, more than what appertains to the security of the State" (YP 8:431). In short, he rejects the core of Elizabethan recusancy legislation—the model for the Clarendon Code—which fined, on an escalating scale that became ever more insupportable, those recusants from Anglican worship who attended nonconformist services on Sundays, whether Protestant or Catholic, issuing writs of *praemunire* (which meant the loss of all property and indefinite imprisonment) against whomever openly displayed their religious dissent. Since he lived under a regime that, since the Interregnum's end, insisted in Halifax's famous phrase that "It is impossible that a Dissenter should not be a Rebel," historical precedent is not always Milton's friend. Yet if his syntactical show of reluctance ("I suppose") is as politic as his Anglican (or simply English) "our," few dissenting tracts at the time made the same concession since all were united against the common papistical foe.

In fact, neither his conventional charges of Catholic heresy and idolatry, nor his expedient placation of Anglicanism and the Cavalier parliament, express the heart of Milton's matter: both are tactics adopted for the occasion and his would-be audience, and to focus upon them is to miss the tract's central point, which is to be found in its most powerful figure—that of Jesus' seamless tunic, "woven from top to bottom," which moved the soldiers who had crucified him to cast lots for the whole garment, rather than tear it into four parts, "one for each soldier" (John 19:23). On the face of it, there are few better images of religious unity or at least *outward* uniformity than this analogy; but for Milton it is an odd choice. In *The Reason of Church Government*, he compares ecclesiastical "discipline" on earth and in heaven to the baroque image (shortly to be superseded) of planetary epicycles, in which each cosmic body executes intermediate circles within its larger orbit (*vide* Adam's inquiries of Raphael). Thus, he suggests, church discipline may orb "it self into a thousand vagancies of glory and delight, and with a kinde of eccentricall equation be as it were an invariable Planet of joy and felicity" (YP 1:752). Then there is *Areopagitica's* "Temple of the Lord" which simply defies the delusion of inseparable uniformity in the church; for "when every stone is laid artfully together, it cannot be united into a continuity, it can but be contiguous in

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this world; neither can every peece of the building be of one form; nay rather the perfection consists in this, that out of many moderat varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes that are not vastly disproportional arises the goodly and the gracefull symmetry that commends the whole pile and structure” (YP 2:555).

As these instances predict, Milton takes the image of Jesus’ seamless tunic, which had evidently been used to justify such religious conformity, and makes it his own: “It is written that the Coat of our Saviour was without seame: whence some would infer that there should be no division in the Church of Christ. Yet seams in the same cloath, neither hurt the garment, nor misbecome it; and not only seams, but Schisms will be while men are fallible. . . .” (YP 8:436) “Seames” belong to our finite and fallible condition, not the idealism of those unnamed polemicists who took the circumstance of Jesus’ woven tunic and converted it willy-nilly into a symbol of lockstep religion, without regard for “limitations and distinctions.” Milton chooses not to argue the exegetical point; instead, he rejects what he terms in *Areopagitica* the “irrational” demand for seamless continuity in any human artifact. In this world, seams “neither hurt the garment, nor misbecome it,” anymore than contiguity or eccentricity necessarily compromise perfection or joy, which brings me back to the question of what it means to “queer” Milton.

The answer depends to some extent on whose Milton: more often than not, the poet and polemicist is known by the constructions we critics place on the texts which bear his name. In the last fifty years or so, this Milton has been some version of rationalist or irrationalist, or both at once. But his writings remain far richer than any of the categories we use to describe them: when I am teaching Milton, and I go back to any work and read it from end to end, I see things that I have forgotten or never saw in the first place; and they are things that do not admit of simple assimilation to “my” Milton—grist for my peculiar critical mill. They require me to stop and think again, always marveling at his art, always astonished at its methodical detail. It is this sense of Milton’s method, I assume, that led Stanley Fish to entitle his book, “How Milton Works,” which he has gleefully described as thirty pages of telling and six hundred of showing. But does such an analytical mechanism, whose popularity remains undiminished after all these years, do complete justice to the possibilities of meaning in Milton’s texts, or to the range of our possible engagements with any human expression? After all, that is—profoundly—why we read, and why literary critics continue to study John Milton.

There are a number of reasons why I think “queering,” as these essays do it, has things to tell us, invisible seams we may not see or understand about Milton’s work, as David Orvis discloses in *Doctrine and Discipline*, where the myth of Anteros functions as a figure of queer desire that belies the overt heterosexuality of Miltonic marriage. Admittedly, what I am about to say reflects my own conception of the poet, his influences and his times; but there are many Milton critics, past and present, who have seen the things I have seen in his writings. “Queering” emphasizes what Milton does, namely, the great fact of creatural life—embodiment—which deity honors with an immanent and then incarnate and always personal God. Indeed, for Milton, there can be no creatural knowledge of God or the world without embodiment, which serves as the threshold between self and other. This is not to say that, for Milton, mind and body are identical (the

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monist thesis), nor are they necessarily antagonistic (the dualist thesis): rather, our experience of them entails a distinction—a *seam* between these contingent and inextricable modes of creatural being, whose operations are mutual but not the same. Self is created from the bodily experience which connects it to the world, but that experience is no more its objective correlative than the body's appearances or the human conventions of identity.

Milton makes this argument in the *Second Defense*, where he says that his body makes him a liar against his will since he does not look blind, and that both conscience and experience refute the accusation that his loss of sight was God's condign punishment for writing against the king. But he was an apostle of incongruity long before his blindness, contending throughout the tracts that neither the experience of continuity nor totality belong to human being. To be a creature is to be embodied, mortal, finite, which for Milton constitutes the condition of our separateness, and of our needful sympathy with things which share the same bodily existence we do. He writes the tracts out of this awareness, as the figures of eccentricity and contiguity attest, which are equally the hallmarks of divine as well as human creativity. Incongruity is also the problem that besets his speakers from the companion poems to *Lycidas*, the sonnets, *Samson* and his two epics, who always find themselves at odds with their world. If it is true, as T.S. Eliot complains, that Milton does not feel his thought "as immediately as the odour of a rose" (Eliot 1 247); that his imagery is "all general," lacking Donne's or Shakespeare's pungent particularity (Eliot 2 140); that "the inner meaning is separated from the surface, and tends to become something occult, or at least without effect upon the reader until fully understood" (Eliot 2 143), then the reasons lie for Milton in the "seam" or distinction between these inseparable modes of human being, mind and body, which find their way into his poetry in subtle and elusive ways.

For Milton, it is an issue of idolatry at the level of poetic image and syntax, in which he would not have us absorbed in the way Eliot the Imagist desires, and first Satan and the apostate, then Eve and Adam do, to their great loss. To rest in unreflective sensation denies the distinction between mind and body, self and experience, the evident and inevident sense of things, what immediately appears and what proves in time to be the case, which constitutes an interlude of indefiniteness, uncertainty, contingency, in which assumption and expectation can be turned upside down. This is of course the temptation endured by Our Saviour, his mother and disciples in *Paradise Regained*, and the question raised by Samson's inner promptings, even to the end. And as in queer theory, the distinction introduces aesthetic issues on which critics have commented since the publication of the late poetry, but which currently have gone by the board in Milton studies. Whether the reader is for or against Milton's poetics, they can generally agree about its effects, as I can agree with Eliot's familiar comments here while placing a construction on them that instead justifies Milton's practice:

In Milton there is always the maximal, never the minimal, alteration of ordinary language. Every distortion of construction, the foreign idiom, the use of a word in a

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foreign way or with the meaning of the foreign word from which it is derived rather than the accepted meaning in English, every idiosyncrasy is a particular act of violence which Milton has been the first to commit. There is no cliché, no poetic diction in the derogatory sense, but a perpetual sequence of original acts of lawlessness. Of all modern writers of verse, the nearest analogy seems to me to be Mallarmé, a much smaller poet, though still a great one. (Eliot 2 154)

We have forgotten what John Crowe Ransom, himself a poet like Eliot, said about Milton's poetry, which he disliked: that it is deeply, deliberately experimental, which Eliot's reference to Mallarmé underscores. We tend to think the so-called "metaphysical" poets experimental; but as Eliot observes, in their conceitfulness they are not only recognizably linked to Donne but obviously and often explicitly to the Tudor Petrarchanists. Milton, however, is unique in his poetics, even inimitable because his imitators reproduce the superficialities but not the effect of his words. As Dr. Johnson complains, he is as idiosyncratic as one can be in the English tradition, which Johnson puts down to his republicanism and hatred of authority. I will not rehearse this aspect of the Milton controversy, which Christopher Ricks has intelligently if not definitively handled; but since queer theory is itself inclined towards an aesthetic of incongruity, I would observe that Milton's poetics share that inclination in a different if comparable fashion.

It is a peculiarly allusive and analytic idiom, whose manifold—and I have argued, ironical—meanings are shaped and disclosed precisely by their deviation from those common usages and patterns of speech which Dr. Johnson, Eliot and others approve. But regardless, it is fidelity to the actual vicissitudes of human experience, in tension with just such assumptions and expectations, that configures the embodied self and makes poetry "simple, sensuous and passionate" for Milton. As early as the Third Prologue, he argues this very Baconian point (made in both the *Advancement* and *De Augmentis*) against scholastic logic as a medium of knowledge, for which he would substitute the "sensible and plausible" speech of poetry, rhetoric and history. Those orders of expression possess the affective power to move the whole human being, not just the intellect, to understanding, decision and action, which for a public man like Milton proposes to be, is the proper means by which "to inculcate wisdom [and] to incite to noble acts" (YP 1:246). By contrast, the problems of scholastic philosophy "have no existence in reality at all, but like unreal ghosts and phantoms without substance obsess minds already disordered and empty of real wisdom," contributing "neither to the general good nor to the honour and profit of our country, which is generally considered the supreme purpose of all sciences" (YP 1:245-46).

Moreover, as with queering, the predicament of embodiment makes his poetry, and indeed all his writings including *Christian Doctrine*, acutely personal. If anyone does, Milton writes out of his experience, his private joys and sorrows, although the lyric ego is not his own but a self that must learn what the author already knows—a process which is consistently, methodically pictured in the

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poetry, but never its consumation. The very sense of the word “embodied” carries the force of a distinction (but no division) between self and its corporeal being, which queering also argues against identitarian claims and Milton expresses by Eve’s “unexperienced” displacement of her being onto its amorous reflection (*LM:PL* 4.457): she knows self solely as unreflective sensation and emotion, but remains ignorant of its source until the divine voice intercedes to tell her that what she admires and then adores is the body’s image of itself, with speech (as it often does in myth) separating self from undifferentiated experience. From this distinction arises that curious belief with which humanity is afflicted, namely, that we are made or rendered bodily, as if we had been otherwise, only to find our selves abruptly—and sometimes falsely—incarnated here. But as Adam describes his birth, we do so because consciousness awakes to the body and the world simultaneously: it learns the body as it learns the world to which sensation inextricably connects it. And as the body changes with each sensation, so the self grasps the contingency of creaturely existence and thereby the limit conditions of human being, subject both within and without to the body’s transformations.

Thus Milton pictures the contingency of this vital relation between self and body in picturing how our first parents differently come to bodily awareness; and queering also understands that not everyone experiences embodiment in the same way. Despite the enthralling immediacy of our sensations and passions, the body does not necessarily feel like self or even part of self, especially when it forces its existence upon our consciousness by its demands or frailties. At that point, it seems antipathetic, estranging. To a certain extent, Samson’s crisis is not his bondage to the Philistines but his bondage to a body he no longer recognizes—now blind and inert, an alien assemblage, Dagon’s mirror image, where it had once been glorious, seamless, miraculous in its strength. And without his familiar body, not to mention his hair, Samson has lost his familiar identity and relation to his God, which he fears may have been delusional all the while. He has also been displaced, not least by his enslavement, from the collective decorum of bodily being that his or any community assumes for its members, not only in appearance, movement and speech, but in the very feelings these express, as Uriel detects the presence of the fallen on earth when he spies Satan “disfigured, more than could befall / Spirit of happy sort” by his “gestures fierce” and “mad demeanor” (*LM:PL* 4.127-28).

But sympathy for the devil is wasted here since the apostate are the incontinent conformists of *Paradise Lost*, and their great chief imperializing when it comes to identity, who invents the dogma of the angels’ autochthonous birth; who sees himself and his predicament reflected everywhere he looks; and whose drive for the self-identical would have everyone, including God, confined in doxological fashion to “mutual amity so strait, so close, / That I with you must dwell or you with me” (*LM:PL* 4.375-77). The problem with this plan is that deity is not as it appears to be, much to Satan’s hysterical dismay, who had supposed himself to be uniquely like God, only to discover at the exaltation that he was only like God’s firstborn creature and divine similitude, the Son. The weird fruit of this perceived demotion, Sin, produced out of Satan’s own narcissistic brain, comes so palpably to resemble her father (or he her) that he is moved to copulate with his

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own image in a Miltonic satire on more than Satan's titanic narcissism. For Milton's devil is a rationalist who claims his reason notionally equalled the divine, if only by reducing deity to the sum of its palpable parts, and who "brings / a mind not to be changed by place or time" (*LM: PL* 1.253-54), declaring to himself and his followers the rationalist manifesto that "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven" (*LM: PL* 1.252-53).

Indeed, the creaturely attempt to escape bodily existence Milton treats as pathological and regularly ascribes to Satan, whose denial of his embodied condition is made actual in a way Marlowe would recognize, when the devil laments on Mt. Niphates, "Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell" (*LM: PL* 4.75). I refer here to Milton's persistent phenomenalism, in which the quality of one's experience depends upon the mind that receives it, as Marlowe's Faust discovers, which at the same time can be no less real for that contingency. Such is the symbiosis between body and mind. One of the reasons Satan undertakes his journey out of hell is because he thinks—until the moment when he arrives—that he can alter the condition of himself and his followers, a delusion that precipitates the Almighty's first joke ("seest thou what rage / Transports our adversary" [*LM: PL* 3.80-81]), and Satan's despair. For he cannot leave hell or change his state for the better: having rejected the source of life in his creator, he has deprived himself of the capacity to grow, learn and change, repent and convert, which attend the reasonable creature's conscious, faithful relation to God. He and the apostate have thus consigned themselves forever to the state of the living dead, condemned to endless circularity and reiteration, whether in hell or the new world, and a landscape bereft of such possibilities—where "peace / And rest can never dwell, hope never comes / That comes to all" (*LM: PL* 1.65- 67).

As everyone knows, Milton explores the predicament of his own blindness but also of his exceptionality in the figure of Samson, whose sightlessness is not only physical but spiritual; Satan in his solipsism is another such figure, as is the suffering speaker of *Paradise Lost* and of one of Milton's greatest sonnets, "When I consider how my light is spent." The conviction of being a person set apart, almost congenital to Milton's writings, is not owing to a complacent superiority or a blind faith in the manifest destiny of his cause. It is evident that, at various junctures in his life, Milton experienced the world he believed governed by a just and good God as incoherent, inordinate, unjust. Such responses are very human; but the doubt they may inspire can lead to profound shifts in understanding, to adamant disbelief on the one hand, or to theodicy on the other—the vindication of God's ways—which early became the chief problematic of Milton's art. His peculiar sense of injustice, of incoherence, appears to consist in the felt discrepancy between his reception and his sense of self, specifically, the exceptional sensations of his own genius whose sheer power and celerity the poems of *Paradise Lost* express to some extent, and with whose capacities he kept faith by a lifetime of intellectual as well as artistic travail. The affinity with Samson needs no explanation, except to insist like Donne in *Death's Duel* on the irreducible ambiguity of that biblical example.

Milton experienced this discrepancy almost from the start (and certainly from his twenty-third year, if the sonnet "How soon hath time" is any index),

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which undoubtedly made genius a burden as much as an afflatus. The burden was likely increased by the very eccentricity which makes his poetry strange, queer, and which appears to have been greeted with derision (“the Lady of Christ’s”) at Cambridge—derision to which his career as a controversialist amply exposed him. More to the point, his reception led Milton to fear that those powers of which he had the most intimate experience would prove not only unproductive, inevident, but ultimately illusory. For although he knew his genius from its sensations, it signified only a capacity, a potential, which however astonishing could remain forever inconsummate, thwarted by the consequences of his own choices—the work of his “left hand.” In his biography of the poet, William Parker mentions “the troubling sense of isolation that comes in time to the gifted” (Parker 1:7), and which inflects Milton’s repeated pleas for a fit audience, though few (*LM: PL* 7.31). This was no convention, nor are the autobiographical passages which dot his tracts the effusions of an overblown ego, for both of which he has been much ridiculed. They derive instead from an abiding anxiety to be known as he experienced himself, and not as he seemed, which again is a very human desire.

When the speaker of *Paradise Lost* dreads that “an age too late, or cold / Climate, or years damp my intended wing / Depressed” and so rob his “higher argument” of its due fame, he confesses a similar fear, to which he adds the further aggravation, “and much they may, if all be mine, / Not hers who brings it nightly to my ear” (*LM: PL* 9.44-47). As it always has, the figure of the muse signifies an extraordinary access of imaginative power, which Milton by then surely knew he had; but here, in the context of fame, the muse is invoked to assuage the speaker’s anxiety about the reception of his art in a hostile world, with he himself “fallen on evil days, / On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues: / In darkness, and with dangers compassed round, / And solitude” (*LM: PL* 7.24-28). Those who mock Milton for the interregnum between his claims and his achievements also ignore his passionate political commitments, unless to depress them by observing that they produced the rule of Charles II, not the saints. But in reducing such expressions to an egotism resolutely oblivious to the popular failure of himself, his ideas and his cause, they betray the *schadenfreude* of those who resent genius, not having it themselves.

But if Miltonic embodiment has its perplexities, it also has its raptures. Notwithstanding the dearth of that T.S. Eliot sought and could not find there, the world of Milton’s poetry is full of noises, sounds and sweet airs, voice and echoes; palpable, mutable atmospheres, winds and breezes; wafting fragrances, tastes, textures and touch; amber light and darkness visible (a paradox, not an oxymoron), as well as the access of instinct, emotion and idea these affections of the body incite in the minds which experience or imagine them. And none of this sensation is a mere backdrop to the action but methodically contributes to its distinctive qualities and significance. Moreover, heavenly beings in *Paradise Lost* are no less embodied than human ones because they are no less creatural. Thus Raphael proves to a bemused Adam—smitten by the archangel’s “glorious shape” (*LM: PL* 5.309), “whose excellence he saw / Transcend his own so far” (*LM: PL* 5.456-57)—that star ladies like himself do indeed go the bathroom, which the archangel does by eating with “keen dispatch / Of real hunger and concoctive heat / To

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transubstantiate” his food in Milton’s satirical usage. As Raphael explains, both human and angelic being have

Within them every lower faculty
Of sense, whereby they hear, see, smell, touch, taste,
Tasting concoct, digest, assimilate,
And corporeal to incorporeal turn. . . . (LM: PL 5.409-15)

For “whatever was created, needs / To be sustained and fed,” in a cosmic alimentary round from earth to sea, to air and fire, moon and sun (LM: PL 5.415-30). Angelic sex can only be next.

Thus the spectrum of creaturely existence pictured by the archangel in Book Five—inanimate, sentient, instinctual, reasonable and intelligent—knows no sharp divisions since all are made by God, who alone is absolutely other as creator distinguished from creature, unmade from made, causeless from caused, infinite from finite: “When we speak of knowing God, it must be understood with reference to the imperfect comprehension of man; for to know God as he really is, far transcends the power of man’s thought, much more of his perception [*nam Deus, prout in se est humanam cogitationem, nedum sensus longe superat*]” (CM 14:30-31). Milton’s *Christian Doctrine* begins with two seemingly contradictory principles—God’s existence and God’s incomprehensibility—which work not to invalidate scripture’s account of deity but paradoxically to reinforce it, as the only authentic religious knowledge available and intelligible to humanity, not least because God himself has provided it.

We are not, Milton says, to speculate about the divine nature but instead to conceive God as he “shows and describes himself in the sacred writings [*qualem in sacris literis ipse se exhibet, seque describit*],” but with this critical proviso—that “he is not so constituted in himself, but of the sort we can grasp [*non qualis in se est, sed qualem nos capere possumus*]” (CM 14:30, my very literal translation). Milton deliberately refrains from using the Latin equivalents of “image,” “picture,” “form” or even “conception” to which Sumner and Kelley have recourse, much less their interpolated “corresponds.” His preference for verbs over nouns, and his use of the indefinite phrase, *qualis . . . talem*, make the iconoclastic point that, for us, deity is never an object for us to know, only a meaning for us to grasp. Similarly, the interpolated concept of correspondence suggests that scriptural expressions permit us to make a stable, discrete and intelligible correlation between the expressions of the text, as we understand them, and the divine nature. This was of course Job’s mistake, who assumed he could confine deity to the covenant’s picture of the Lord; thus the creator God’s theopany from the whirlwind obliges Job to confess that “I have uttered what I did not understand, / things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (Job 42:3). That is, in our human finitude, we simply cannot say *how* deity is as scripture depicts it, only that it is so.

Thus those critics who have sought systematically, in the scholastic fashion, to organize *Christian Doctrine*’s account of the divine attributes inevitably hit an impasse, because Milton consistently refuses to say more about God than

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(in his view) scripture itself does, and that includes whatever it leaves unsaid about the interrelations among its images. Like the Protestant reformers, he makes our knowledge of God, whom “we must call WONDERFUL and INCOMPREHENSIBLE,” effectively groundless (YP 6:152)—a matter of faith. So if we want to know the unknowable God, we should think of the divine as scripture speaks of it, but without supposing that its God-talk is either factual or symbolical, and thus grounds for extrapolations to the nature of religious *invisibilia*. Since no one “can form correct ideas about God guided by nature or reason alone, without the word or message of God” (YP 6:132), there is no curtain of phenomena that reason can boldly thrust aside to disclose the divine reality, nor can we speculatively infer the divine nature by analogy either to our own or creation’s:

For granting that, both in the literal and figurative descriptions of God, he is exhibited not as he really is, but in such a manner as may be within the scope of our comprehensions, yet we ought to entertain such a conception of him, as he, in condescending to accommodate himself to our capacities, has shown that he desires we should conceive. For it is on this very account that he has lowered himself to our level, lest in our flights above the reach of human understanding, and beyond the written word of Scripture, we should be tempted to indulge in vague cogitations and subtleties. [*Quamvis enim hoc concedatur, Deum, non qualis in se est, sed qualem nos capere possumus, talem semper vel describi vel adumbrari, nos tamen nibilo minus debemus talem prorsus nostra concipere, qualis ipse sed captum accommodans nostrum, vult concipi; ob id ipsum enim se ad nos demisit, ne nos elati supra captum humanum supraque quod scriptum est, vagis cogitationibus atque argutiis locum daremus.*] (CM 14:30-33)

The consequence of this radical constraint upon inference, which expresses the distinction between creature and creator, is that we are neither to add to or subtract from the scriptural picture of God according to our own judgments: “to do so would be to follow the example of men, who are always inventing more and more subtle theories about him” (YP 6:134). Thus Milton rejects the theological ascription to God of human feelings (anthropopathy) *except* as the sacred text applies such ideas to him. When scripture says of God that he “repents,” “is grieved in his heart,” “rested and was refreshed,” “feared the enemy’s displeasure,” Milton exhorts the reader to ascribe these emotions to him as a *picture* devised to convey what remains perpetually beyond our understanding, and for us to use in order to have relationship with the divine: “let us believe that it is not beneath God to feel what grief he does feel, to be refreshed by what refreshes him, and to fear what he does fear” (YP 6:135).

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In justifying this tact, he goes so far as to enlist the *selem elohim*, in which *God is said to have created man in his own image, after his own likeness*, Gen. i. 26, and not only his mind but also his external appearance” (YP 6:135): “if God habitually assign to himself the members and form of man, why should we be afraid of attributing to him what he attributes to himself, so long as what is imperfect and weakness when viewed in reference to ourselves be considered as most complete and excellent when imputed to God” (CM 14:35). For Milton, the *selem elohim* not only emphasizes the legitimacy of scriptural anthropomorphism, which we cannot controvert, but also the dignity of human being, including the human body, to whose order of creatural existence its creator adapts his words, and enfolds his nature in the incarnation. In short, for Milton, scripture’s way of speaking shows us how, miracles having ceased, to find God *in* the world, which is neither by confining significance to the superficial or ostensible sense of things, nor by denying their embodied, circumstantial force in favor of a wholesale metaphysical translation. If I may put it this way, God is always an implication of experience, as Milton explains in the first pages of *Christian Doctrine*, within phenomena but never the same as them, owing to the insuperable distinction between creature and creator, the caused and the causeless, finite and infinite.

The revelation of God through the Son and Christ, which comprise scripture’s subject, effectively model this hermeneutic for Milton. Unlike his Father (in gospel usage), the Son was created by God voluntarily, “within the bounds of time” (YP 6:209), “endowed with the divine nature and whom similarly, when the time was ripe, God miraculously brought forth his human nature from the Virgin Mary” (YP 6:211). In Milton’s subordinationism, the Son is not unmade or eternal but begotten by divine decree “before the foundations of the world,” and possessed of the divine nature to the extent that the Father elects to bestow it upon him. As a creature, he can be seen and heard where the Father cannot, and is thus preeminently the image of God—“*the brightness of his glory and the image of his substance*”—deity’s persona and himself the agent of divine creation in time, after Hebrews 1, and finally “the only mediator between God and man” (YP 6:211).

In short, for Milton, the Son as creature is the embodied subject of historical theophany (as are the angels), distinguished from God by his name and relation but more profoundly by his experiential status and role. Indeed, he is all that can be known of deity in this life and in *Paradise Lost*, where the angels in their song of praise reproduce Isaiah’s sight of the Lord in the temple, whom Milton more than once identifies not as deity but as the Son or an angel. And with the event of the Son’s incarnation as Jesus and the Christ, deity invests godhead in the bodily life of human being no less than in creatural existence with the begetting of the Son, even as the distinction is still maintained and in fact compounded: every revelation, every manifestation of the divine within time is thus not only a picture of itself that deity elects to create, but its form is always an assemblage of modes of existence distinct from each other: creator from creature, divine from human, self from experience. Yet as Milton says of the *theanthropos*—“God-man”—the Son as the person Jesus of Nazareth, they “coalesce [*coalesce*]” in each individual to form a whole person, if one with invisible seams (YP 6:228; CM 14:228).

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It follows from his theology that Milton has no use for any order of transcendence that is not strictly conceptual and moral, conducted within the phenomenal bounds set by human life. Disdain for the body is disdain for the creature and its creator; and it is no small irony that satanic rationalism has as its *contrapasso* the increasing incarnation of the apostate, whose refined substance gradually grows more gross with their sin even as their original glory is obscured. At the same time, Milton rejects sheer sensory engrossment of an undifferentiated, Nietzschean kind because it collapses mind with body to the exclusion of their distinction, and thus the possibility of that inevident order of existence and meaning which belongs to *res non apparentes*—those things which do not appear as such, like the hidden God, a person's self, the significance and destiny of a life or a nation, or the sense of the text. They are consequently the subject of faith, as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” in the words of Hebrews 11:1.

Thus Milton himself “cannot praise a fugitive and a cloister'd virtue, unexercis'd & unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat” (YP 2:515). In other words, virtue is nothing if it consists in mere negation and rigid abstinence, whose “whitenesse” in Milton's own disdainful words “is but an excrementall whitenesse,” because in satanic fashion it rejects the claims of experience upon understanding—a conviction the poet held as early as the companion poems and *Comus*, where (I have argued) the Lady undergoes a rape that, however figural in its expression, gives an existential edge to Miltonic chastity, not to say Comus' version of *seizing the day*. Milton's eccentric substitution of that notional virtue for charity, and his remarks on chastity in the *Apology for Smectymnus*, where he defends himself against charges of debauchery, have given the poet the reputation of a prig. But what Milton means by chastity is not abstinence but rather temperance—the exercise of discretion, proportion, moderation in the conduct of life—and as he and the Lady argue against Comus' libertinism, the opposite of Stoic *apatheia* or indifference. A prig would not picture sex in paradise or imagine angelic coitus, nor would he write how “half her swelling breast / Naked met his under the flowing gold / Of her loose tresses hid” (LM: PL 4.495-97), or imagine how the “youthful beauty” of the cherub Zephon abashes Satan, who “felt how awful goodness is, and saw / Virtue in her shape how lovely, saw, and pined / His loss” (LM: PL 4.845-49).

There is a moral intelligence to be gained from experience, directed by sensation and emotion, that Milton will not willingly let go. Embodiment also describes the limit conditions of our mutable, finite being and consequently of our understandings, which are confined not to sensory experience as such but to the meanings that experience implicates, indicative both of evident and inevident existences and operations. It is these Adam calls “my fill / Of knowledge, what this vessel can contain; / Beyond which was my folly to aspire” (LM:PL 12.558-60). In other words, the “paradise within . . . happier far” that Michael promises our first parents is not subjectivity insulated from the body's sensory pollution, or a life led in antinomian anxiety (LM:PL 12.587). It is rather what Montaigne, that

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unmatched philosopher of embodiment, pronounces against all “humours soaring to transcendency”:

It is an accomplishment, absolute and as it were God-like, to know to enjoy our being as we ought. We seek other attributes because we do not understand the use of our own; and, having no knowledge of what is within, we sally forth outside ourselves. A fine thing to get up on stilts; for even on stilts we must still walk with our legs! And upon the finest throne in the world, we are seated, still, upon our arses. (Montaigne 1268-69)

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